

Fire district starts billing for services

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Some visitors to the Aptos area will be getting some mail next week — bills from the Aptos-La Selva Fire District for emergency assistance.

The first mailing, a month's worth of calls, is about 35 bills.

The bills are being sent to non-district residents who were, for example, involved in car accidents or needed emergency medical assistance. The amount of the bills vary, depending on the type of the emergency, how many men and how much equipment responded and how long it lasted. But some of the bills range from \$120 to \$240.

The bills, said Fire Chief Chuck Mornard, are a budget-balancing measure conceived after the county supervisors sent the district a \$58,700 bill for property tax collection.

"We didn't have the ability to budget for that (property tax) payment and were blindsided," Mornard said, referring to the tax collection charge levied by Santa Cruz County Supervisors last October as one way of balancing

their own budget.

"So we looked for a way to make up the deficit without raising taxes," Mornard said.

Spread over an entire budget year, Mornard thinks the fees will just about cover the property tax collection charges.

"We think we can recover as much money as we are paying the county for tax collection," Mornard said. "We are just trying to recover our costs without raising taxes here."

The idea came from the fire district's attorney and a meeting with Assemblyman Sam Farr. Both, Mornard said, pointed to a section of the state's Health and Safety Code that allows fire districts to bill everyone involved for the services provided.

If an accident occurs on a county road or the state freeway, he said, "we will probably end up sending them a bill, their insurance companies a bill and one to either the state or the county."

"It will be up to them to hash out who pays for it," he said. "But we will hold the victims responsible."

"Basically, if they don't pay, we will take them to small claims court. The backup to the county is for when the non-resident doesn't have the ability to pay."

Generally, Mornard added, district residents will be exempt from the bills. So will employees who live outside the district but who work for inside-district employers and are injured at their workplace.

But someone who does something illegal that involves the fire department, such as an illegal burn or toxic spill, might get a bill — even if they live in the district.

The fees — the first in Santa Cruz county — have caught county officials and others by surprise.

The California State Automobile Association, which operates the largest automobile insurance operations in northern and central California, said other fire districts in the Central Valley are beginning such operations. CSAA spokesman Ben Winkler said the company "is going to protect our insurance interests but we have yet to evaluate our policy" on the fire department fees.

County Board of Supervisors chairman Fred Keeley gulped when told about the fire district's solution to the state- and county-imposed budgetary crisis, but said, "I can't fault any unit of local government for trying to solve their budget crisis as a result of the state shifting their budget troubles onto local government."

Keeley couldn't say if the county would pay the fees if the district bills it.

Other fire districts are watching the Aptos experiment.

The Central County fire district received a \$87,000 bill property-tax collection fee from the county. Central fire chief Steve Negro said this week that he's wary of such a program for the district that serves Capitola, Soquel and Live Oak — the largest in Santa Cruz County.

"My hope is that within state and local governments someone is going to collectively work out the financing of state and local governments — because it can't continue like it is now," he said.

"I don't know that what they are doing out there in Aptos is the answer."